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Shaming and Other Tools of Patriarchy

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Patriarchy does not merely subsist on structures which are out of our influence and control. In fact, the patriarchal mindset is one that has been passed on over societies and generations, and one which changes its character depending on the historical place and time. Today, we are confronted with other mechanisms of oppression than the ones which prevailed 50, 100 or 500 years ago. At the same time though, there are certain parallels and patterns which have survived over the centuries and which reveal the manner in which the war on women, their thoughts and bodies has been conducted. The repression and exploitation of women, through which the establishment of the patriarchal system has been made possible, can be traced back to thousands of years. The development of this system can be deduced from the erasure of female key figures and divinities in the mythologies, and can also be witnessed later from the devaluation of ‘femininity’, of the natural and corporal in (mostly Western) philosophy and, not least, from the witch hunts of Europe which started in the late Middle Age. When looking at the ideological and psychological means of war, which have been used

against women* in the last 5000 years, we can recognize certain patterns with which we are also similarly confronted with today.

To name it concretely, we can speak of a demonization of women, accompanied by the shaming and degradation of women. In the historical analysis of patriarchy the hegemonic-male historical narrative portrays women as passive factors, which have in no way and no time put up resistance. Moreover, the patriarchal system is being understood as natural and god-given. Yet there is the other side of the coin, which would have remained hidden if it wasn't for feminists revealing this history of resistance in the last decades. The history of patriarchy is at the same time the history of a war against the rebelling body and the resistant spirit.

Among others, the Kurdish women's movement has analysed the remarkable depiction of female figures in the Sumerian, Babylonian, Indian and Greek mythologies. They speak of a crash that happened in the mythologies, a crash which destroyed the image of the worshipped Goddess and started ascribing predominantly destructive attributes to her. From this crash the beginning of the patriarchal society can be detected. Today, when we inform ourselves about the goddesses of the mythologies, we come upon contradicting traditions. Many powerful, strong goddesses are at the same time described as devious and almost demonic. A good example of this lies in the Indian goddesses Durga and Kali, which are described as independent and strong figures who, unlike other goddesses, do not have a spouse or a male equivalent. The goddess Durga symbolizes life and death, kindness and punishment at the same time. Similarly, Kali, who is said to be born from the brow and from the anger of Durga, is a goddess of creation and renewal, but also of death and destruction. Both of them symbolize sexuality and *shakti*, which is primordial female energy, but thereby rather representing the dark and destructive side of *shakti* in the first place. In some cases, they are described as loudly laughing, wretched and demonically dancing figures. On the opposite, there are goddesses

like Sita, who is rather described as being tame and standing for fidelity, fertility and fortitude.

The goddesses Kali and Durga are not the only examples showing us that the portrayal of strong female goddesses go along with demonization in many cases. The Sumerian goddess Lilith, which is at the same time the first woman in Jewish mythology, puts up resistance against submission and stands for independence and sexual freedom. In later depictions, she is feared as a demon, seductress or child murderer. This pattern of demonization of female self-determination, strength and free sexuality managed to live through over centuries, until the Middle Age in Europe, where one of the bloodiest and cruellest campaigns in the history of patriarchy took place.

In the beginning of capitalism, the war on the rebellious body was intensified when they tried to exploit and turn every creative, constructive energy of the human into labour power. Before and during this time there were widespread beliefs of vivid energies in nature and natural forces like magicians and, especially, witches. In her book “Caliban and the Witch”, Silvia Federici (*1942) writes that the practice of magic was not compatible with the evolving capitalist order and work. Capitalism, a system that calculates, logically prognosticates and concludes and disciplines, was opposing witchcraft, which was then considered lawless, unpredictable, chaotic and evil. As a result of the demonization of rebellious women, there was a sexist campaign and witch hunt, which is often forgotten in the analysis of the history of capitalism. Rebellious women who did not conform to the social norms were labelled as witches by their own relatives and neighbours. ‘Promiscuity’, having ‘illegitimate’ children, strong bonds between women, wisdom and knowledge about nature, being connected to nature, the possession of cats (thousands of cats have been murdered as well!), prostitution, adultery, living without a man or having a ‘bad record’ in society were all seen as evidence for being a witch. A witch was also a woman who was not submissive, who

disagreed, defended herself or swore. Witches were in some way a symbol of resistance against the patriarchal order. Their resistance was answered with degradation and shaming. The execution of 60.000 witches was a public act, a name and shame event, where the women who have been excluded from society were burned at the stake. The punishment and torture of witches aimed at demonizing and humiliating them. Nature, magic, witches and women, which until then used to be important parts of life – were destroyed and degraded as part of the development of capitalism and the emergence of rationalist science.

Also in Western philosophy, the devaluation of nature, the body and everything material went along with the devaluation of women, who were declared unreasonable, irrational, unstable, unpredictable and compulsive beings. Philosophers, scientists, psychoanalysts and many more engaged in this. All these methods of defamation and demonization of women through shaming, accusation, subjugation and objectification survived over the centuries. Also the present society is not spared from the idea that a woman who lives a self-determined, free and independent life, who organizes and allies herself with other women, argues, shouts, disagrees, discusses, decides over her own body, decides over her love and sex life or does in other forms resist the sexist norms, should be ‘ashamed’. Shaming, humiliation, exposure (keyword: revenge porn) and accusations have always been tools of the patriarchal system, which should definitely be analysed more intensively in order to fight them. The manner and extent changes depending on cultural and social realities, but to name only a few examples, women* often are seen as a mirror of the ‘honour’ and ‘pride’ of her family. What a woman* wears, who she spends time with, whom she loves or if she loves, whom she marries or not marries and many other grotesque standards determine her reputation in society. She is judged – and this is something almost every one of us does – for the way she dresses, for her body, for the way she walks, laughs or dances and especially

for her decisions concerning her sexual life. This is not only due to the fact that our society has a distorted relationship on the subject of sexuality in general, which is increasingly shaped by perversion and demonstrations of power, but especially when it comes to the sexuality of women*. Her sexual life determines her so-called purity, and as soon as she moves away from the social norms she is seen as impure. This is part of an old pattern which we can recognize as far back as to mythology. The image the society has of women* is that of an extremely ambivalent and unpredictable being. On the one hand, she is seen as a symbol of fertility, purity, groundedness and maternal love, while only being socially accepted with these attributes. On the other hand, at the latest when a woman begins to resist, the other side of the coin reveals, where she is being labelled as an uncontrollable, ‘hysterical’, devious, impure and diabolic being which has to be controlled and subordinated. Between these ‘poles of femininity’ there seem to be no grey areas, and through the creation of the ‘slut-saint’-dichotomy the psychological and emotional pressure on women* is even more intensified. Shaming, embarrassment and accusation are the means of war which the sexist society uses in every part of life. The sense of shame and guilt are supposed to break her spirit, to subjugate her (collective) resistance and to weaken her self-confidence.

It is up to us and coming generations of revolutionary feminists and the youth to reveal these and other means of war by the patriarchy and to put up a collective resistance against them. Witch, bitch, slut, child murderer – or whatever name they give us – let us ourselves determine our names, colours, spirits, lives and revolution and rebel against the disenchantment of life and the world, against the artificial hierarchies and powers.